

[Compagny]

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Morning thoughts: For the first time, this morning, it occurs to me that it was appropriate behavior for troops in the early Seventies--or sooner--to malingering, to "coop" (as police say) by cooping up a mile from base, to intimidate officers who wanted to endanger their lives by hard charging...or more particularly, it was appropriate for junior officers to direct and abet such activity, to protect the lives of their men in a useless, wrongful, aggressive, hopeless war (or, a war in which one of those adjectives was valid, let alone all).

In 1988, at the age of 57, I realize that I have no more recognized these truths till now than, till 1968, I realized that leaking could be patriotic and right, even obligatory.

To be sure, in both contexts, a better course could be open resistance, exposure of the war to Congress, courts, press and public, deliberate disobedience. If one were a junior officer, such actions might not protect, so well, one's own men--since they would promptly get a more compliant troop commander--but it would have a chance to protect the army as a whole, and the enemy population, and the society, by ending the war and preventing others like it.

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However, for those who couldn't imagine achieving such effects or acquiring access to such channels, or who weren't willing to take on such personal risks, or who were most attached to the immediate safety of the men under their direct command: the realization of the hopelessness and murderousness of the war, the deceptiveness and invalidity of its public rationale--not so hard to learn from frontline experience in the light of homefront debate--should point immediately to the possible course of subverting orders and policy in the interests of avoiding murder and casualties.

This is not a theoretical response. Many soldiers, and perhaps many officers, responded in just this fashion. What is new for me is to realize that this was more than reasonable, given, say, what I and my colleagues came to know at the time. If Vann and I didn't act that way, that says as much about our ideological blindness and our own risk-proneness as about our discipline and patriotism.

Take Vann's shock, outrage and disdain regarding the unwillingness of ARVN officers, and troops, to pursue the VC, to take casualties, to search aggressively (where the VC were likely or known to be), and their tendency to reach tacit accommodations. Neil reports Vann's reactions with approval now, just as he shared them at the time. Yet in retrospect, who was being more sensible,

Vann or his counterparts? Corrupt as they may have been, what interests would they have served by killing more VC at the cost of losing more of their own troops? In particular, should they have done this at Vann's behest, while there was no radical change in the GVN or its relation to the US? How would their increased casualties (or attrition of the local VC) have led to any greater prospects of victory for the GVN as a whole?

(Recall what Gen. Dzu said to Vann, Chau and me about corruption: In a long war, as they see no hope of success, above all so long as they are led by a regime so corrupt, incompetent, and dependent on foreigners, as they see that nothing they might do will make any long-run difference...commanders turn their attention to providing for their families, in their short time in command...

I don't recall reflecting before that exactly the same applies to their bent for tactical caution in combat, and to their safeguarding their own positions by following the priorities of their superiors, whether in remaining ready to put down coups or to swell the flow of corruption, rather than to pursue the futile and costly goal of killing VC. Accomodations were rational at every level, given their, Vietnamese comprehension of the true nature of the war, forced on them by the Americans and collaborationist elites in the face of the nationalist and self-protective guerrillas, and their understanding of its unpromising prospects.

The kind of hard-charging, gung ho junior leadership that I might have provided in Vietnam if I had been 22 in 1967 or 1972 would have been exactly as appropriate, in that situation, as the efforts of British prisoners to build the bridge over the River Kwai on schedule. The presumption that the orders by one's commanders had greater moral authority or real validity with respect to legitimate national security than the orders of Japanese jailors was, in this period (as in many others) deluded.

To have endangered my men in such pursuits would have been inexcusable. (Despite the fact that it would have been excused, even applauded and demanded, by folks at home).

This is not to condone a kind of laxness in a combat zone that would itself have endangered the troops, inviting attack and magnifying its consequences: a failure to man defenses, keep security alert at night, patrol in the vicinity to deter or detect attackers. But aggressive seeking of contact and combat, as urged by Vann, simply made no sense for the Vietnamese, under the political conditions that prevailed--God knows, they understood this and acted accordingly--and therefore, for this among other reasons, made no sense for Americans.

This was obvious to Sheehan by 1972, hence his critical account of Vann's behavior then. But in reality, it was just as obvious to the Vietnamese Vann was advising in 1962-63, when Vann

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and Sheehan saw their behavior as simply cowardly, corrupt, lazy and recalcitrant. (Note that when they were actually under attack, ARVN usually gave a much better account of themselves: till the rout from the top in 1975, when they no longer had US air support).

It was not that our effort was useless and hopeless because of these qualities in the Vietnamese we supported, as Sheehan thought by 1966 and apparently still thinks (do I misjudge him? I haven't read the whole book). Rather, "our" Vietnamese showed, or gave rein to, these characteristics in large part because our effort--i.e., the war--was hopeless and made their own efforts useless (both before our troops arrived, while they were there, and afterwe had left), for a number of reasons, including those that defined our aims and actions as aggressive and criminal.

Partly these thoughts are inspired by seeing "Bat 21" the other day, in which a downed flier is rescued in Vietnam at the cost not only of several American lives and many Vietcong, but with the destruction of a whole villageful of civilians. The sympathetic, civilian-like older officer who has been downed (Gene Hackman) kills one villager himself, who has found him in his hut; Hackman feels terrible, seeing the sorrow of the bereaved family. He acted in self-defense--in the other man's country, and house. Later he urges that the villagers not be bombed, only to be told by the heroic observers who has been trying to get him out that, "That was my buddy with hishead shot off in that paddy": this as the explanation for blanketing the women and children of the village with napalm and white phosphorus, since they happen to be mixed in with VC soldiers.

The very reason for Hackman to have been in the air, before he was shot down (by a SAM, over SVN? Apparently an error, unless the action was just below the DMZ) was preparation for a blanket bombing raid: "We're taking out everything within 8 klicks of the crossroads." There are several instances of direct insubordination--privately condoned by commanders--in efforts to save buddies; but no mention of proportionality, immunity of non-combatants, hope of success...let alone of (US) aggression.